

Audiobooks on iPods

A motivating reading strategy

By Ann Truesdell
MACUL Grant Recipient

Getting out a book during free time in class. Reading on the bus all the way home and continuing to read after dinner. Getting caught reading under the covers in bed with a flashlight. Excitedly and actively participating in class discussions about a novel. Discussing books with friends during recess and passing time. A desire to read *Moby Dick*, *The Great Gatsby*, and other classic literature. No more “I-have-to-go-to-the-bathroom” excuses to get out of Independent Reading time.

Does this sound like the average student with reading disabilities? It wasn’t at our school—at least, not until we introduced them to audiobooks on iPods.

Why iPods?

At the beginning of last school year, we had ten students who had been diagnosed with a reading disability in our school. Since numerous studies have shown that using audiobooks with underachieving readers boosts reading abilities, our Media Center had previously invested in over thirty-five new audiobooks on CD. While many students quickly responded to this new medium by checking the books out with the audiobooks so that they could read and listen at the same time, the most important use of the audiobooks was with the low reading students. Interest in audiobooks among all students, especially the low-level readers, was quite high despite requiring a bulky CD player to listen to the books on. In fact, we found that many do not own portable CD players and feel that the devices are “old fashioned” and “uncool.” The students of today listen to their music on iPods—so why not their audiobooks? We expected that interest in audiobooks would skyrocket when marketed on small, light, and “cool” iPod Shuffles. We were right.

Motivational and Instructional Success!

Our focus began with the ten students who are labeled as students with reading disabilities. These students work closely with a special education teacher who observes their reading habits and monitors their reading abilities. While a couple had average motivation to read, the rest disliked reading mostly because they found it difficult and frustrating. However, while reading hadn’t always peaked their interest, the audiobooks on iPods certainly did. The students were immediately excited by the prospect of listening to their classroom novels on an iPod independently with the rest of their class during silent reading time.

Training students to use the iPod Shuffles was quick; the devices are easy-to-use and familiar to our tech-savvy students. As Media Specialist, I did the more

complicated task of locating the audiobooks, downloading them, and then transferring them to the iPods. The students were eager to use the audiobooks, and immediately listened to their first classroom novels using the devices. The responses from students and their teachers were all overwhelmingly positive. Students felt “cool” listening to the iPods in class, rather than embarrassed, as some had previously felt with the bulkier, outdated audio devices. The students’ peers did not poke fun at the iPod, but rather expressed their desire to use one as well. Students used the devices more than they might have used an audiobook on cassette or CD. On numerous occasions I received comments from parents and teachers that their students used the iPod for listening to audiobooks on the bus, during free time in class, and at home—previously they were never so attached to a book.

In addition, our students with reading disabilities experienced far fewer difficulties when using the iPods to read a book. All were able to finish their novels much faster than they normally could; one teacher commented, “Using the iPod shuffle, ‘Jenny’ was able to read *Hoot* over the holiday break. If not for the iPod, it may have taken Jenny two months to read this book.” In addition to finishing the books more quickly, students had a



better understanding of what they had read. Their English teachers commented on their increased participation in class discussions and their completed homework assignments. The students took pride in having read and understood the entire book, and were thus excited to discuss it with others and found doing their homework much easier.

The ten students who used the iPods for assistance reading classroom novels also used the iPods for assistance when reading novels of their own choosing for pleasure. At our school, we found that our students with reading difficulties often became frustrated with reading for pleasure because they simply were not able to read the books that interested them. Books written for children of their age were too hard, so these students could not read what their friends were reading. By using the iPods, our ten students read what interested them and were not limited to books at their lower reading levels. One girl using the iPod was frequently overheard discussing books with friends, while a boy using the iPod commented that he wanted to begin

reading the classics next year in high school. One mother became choked up as she told me about catching her son reading *Surviving the Applewhites* under his covers with a flashlight—with the iPod, too, of course.

Our school also ended up with additional iPod shuffles, which we made available to all other students for checkout from the Media Center. My staff and I immediately realized that we would need to somehow invest in additional devices, as the wait list for available iPods grew to over 150 students. Luckily, with parent donations, next year we will have a ten additional iPods for checkout—a total of 27 iPods for our students to use. The iPods are a success story at our school and will continue to remain in operation.

Maintenance and Management

Maintaining and managing the iPods is a daily requirement, but with a routine it is not difficult. When it is a

student's turn to checkout an iPod, they choose an audiobook from our collection or request one to be downloaded, if possible. If we already own the audiobook, it takes only a couple of minutes to put the file on the iPod. If we do not own the desired audiobook, the process takes a bit longer, but students are willing to come back later that day or the next day. I acquire the vast majority of our audiobooks through www.audible.com or www.iTunes.com, though they are also available from Recorded Books and audiobooks on CD can be transferred onto the iPods. Under Fair Use guidelines, each audiobook file is available for checkout to only one student at a time; if two students want the same book, I need to purchase the audiobook file twice. This means that I have to keep records of what files are checked out to what child and on



MUSIC software plays for all!

By Ryan A. Gonder
MACUL Grant Recipient

what device. I keep track of my files by using an empty CD case for each audiobook file and barcoding it. With a picture and description of the book inserted into the case, the available audiobooks are as easily browsed as printed books. I also barcode each iPod, so when a student checks out the device I scan both the file display case and the iPod into my circulation system under the student's name.

Each iPod shuffle is protected by a hard plastic sports case that is designed by Apple to fit over the device and remain on while operating. The cases protect the iPods from being dropped, being shoved into backpacks, and general kid usage. Each student is taught to use the iPod and sport case right at the circulation desk as they check out their iPod. The iPod Shuffles come with earbuds, which are offered to the students at checkout as well, though some students choose to use their own headphones. When the device is returned, it is checked in and the file is checked in. The iPod and earbuds are cleaned with sanitary wipes and remain in the Media Center only momentarily—within minutes it seems that the next student on my waiting list has appeared to claim their time with this high-tech reading strategy.

For more information on our Audiobooks on iPod program, visit us online at www.digitalbcs.com/media-center under the Programs section. □

Ann Truesdell is a Media Specialist at Birmingham Covington School (Grades 3–8) Birmingham Public Schools, Michigan.

The Lake Fenton Community Schools were elated to be awarded a grant through MACUL to fund the purchase of software for the purposes of furthering music education in our district.

This project included the purchase of the *Sibelius Educational Software Suite* and corresponding site licenses to foster a relationship between technology and music for 5th through 12th grade students. This complete software package, which is suitable for all educational levels, is being used for the writing, playing, printing, and publishing of music notation, as well as ear training, aural testing, and music theory training. Additionally, the software allows students to hear their work and make it easy to find and correct mistakes. The site licenses allow our students to work simultaneously in computer labs on orchestration, composition, aural harmony, music theory, and transposition, as well as develop their very own musical creativity.

Prior to the purchase of this software, our school district did not begin the formal instruction of music until the 5th grade, which put our students at a huge disadvantage to those students who attend schools where music is offered at the elementary level. Results of the Selmer Music Guidance Survey indicated that, on average, our current 4th grade students operated with 17% less musical knowledge, ability, and comprehension than students who attend schools where music education has been implemented at the elementary level. Due to this startling statistic, we found it necessary that we give our students all of the necessary tools, materials, and instruction beginning at the 5th grade level that will allow them to excel at the same level as those students who are fortunate enough to have music education in elementary school.

The purchase of this software allowed our district to make leaps and bounds in the areas of composition, arranging, reading and notating music, listening to, analyzing, describing, and evaluating music, and the relationship between music in history, culture, fine arts, and disciplines outside of the arts. These are all national standards that needed to be met within our district. Additionally, this software helped improve our students' ability to decipher rhythmic and tonal patterns as well as have the ability to create their own. The implementation of computer-based music learning stations assists in learning and reinforcing the fundamentals of music, as well as bridge the gap between traditional music and creating new, more diverse compositions.

Overall, the project goals are being met and exceeded because our students are developing the knowledge and comprehension of the specific objectives defined in the National Standards of Music Education, which continue to increase the quality of our schools' performing ensembles, and mold our students into more musically, historically, and culturally savvy citizens of society. □

Ryan A. Gonder teaches 5th–8th Grade, and High School Instrumental Music at Torrey Hill Intermediate School, Lake Fenton Middle School, and Lake Fenton High School, all of the Lake Fenton Community Schools.
